Durable Democracy

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Democracy is the complex web of connections between individual politicians, political parties, the electorate, civil society, media and state institutions that is formed through the electoral process. The roots of Indian democracy have been strengthened due to the establishment and the consolidation of the Indian Election Commission through the Constitution of India and the Parliament. The trust invested by the politicians, public, civil society and the media invested in this Commission have further empowered it. Despite this, the Indian Election Commission requires still greater independence and this has become a highly significant aspect of discussions of electoral reforms in India.

Thanks in large part to the media's effectiveness, there is a growing awareness and expanded consciousness in Indian society of the prevalent flaws in their democracy. Within this context, there has been a pressing emphasis since the 1980s on electoral reforms that would make Indian democracy more efficient, transparent and relatively free from pressures of communalism, caste-ism, ethno-centrism and gender, along with class based concens. Especially needed are electoral reforms that deal with the independence of the Election Commission, prevent the criminalization of politics and the politics of criminalization, and which promote the cleansing of the political parties themselves. Among the miscellaneous issues requiring electoral reform are gender issues, as well as technical issues that can enhance further transparency in Indian democracy.

Unlike India, Pakistan has a political history that demonstrates the vulnerability of its democracy. Since the country's inception, Pakistan's politics hves oscillated between military rule and electoral democracy. The latter held sway from 1947-1958, 1972-1977, 1988-1999 and, finally, since 2008, and military rule persisted during the intermittent periods. This alone suggests that Pakistan's democracy has continuously been in a state of transition. Even the democratic phase from 1988-1999 remained politically unstable due to mid-term dismissals of both Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, representing Pakistan People's Party (PPP), and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, representing Pakistan Muslim League (PML). Thus it has not only been military coups d'état which strained the democratic process in Pakistan, but even the elected governments which have been unable to stabilize the country's democratic process in the country. Traditionally, the un-curtailed power of the military establishment, along with the deterioration in civil-military relations, has been held responsible for fragile democratic process in Pakistan. At a deeper level, however, it is also the failure of the democratic leadership to strengthen the democratic process itself. Fortunately, democracy has continued in Pakistan since end of Musharraf's rule in 2008, and the first ever peaceful transition in government occurred in 2013 when that of Prime Minister Zardari completed its five-year term with the peaceful election of that of Nawaz Sharif.

Why and what does Pakistan need to learn from the practice of Indian democracy? As a nascent and fragile democracy, Pakistan needs to study the institutionalization of democracy in India. In particular, Pakistan needs to further enhance the power of its own Elections Commission through independent funding as well as its empowerment through the media, public, civil society, and the political parties. Electoral reforms in this regard would increase the trust of the electorate and politicians alike in the Elections Commission, and this, in turn, would make Pakistan's democracy more transparent. Moreover, following the Indian example, Pakistan needs to prevent the criminalization of politics through its own electoral reforms. Such reforms would ideally break the nexus between politics and crime created by black money, muscle men, violence, mafias, and others. The Election Commission of India has been empowered by the political parties, media, the civil society, as well as by the general public who so far have accepted the results of all general and State-level elections. Yet, India has been trying to make its Election Commission even more independent through electoral reforms. Pakistan also should move in a similar direction.

Finally, Pakistan also must increase the transparency in the political parties themselves through electoral reforms. Such reforms should ideally deal with such questions as internal elections within political parties, along with the audit of political parties' accounts, among other issues; aim at ending the strong linkage between politics and criminalization; and include the implementation of a range of other miscellaneous reforms. But recommendations for electoral reforms are one matter, and their implementation is quite another. Unless the government has the will strong enough to carry through reforms through effective legislation and its enforcement, democracy in Pakistan will remain a myth.

In a nutshell, democracy as a model of governance has been so very complex that every age and territory has had to discover its own merits and its own flaws in the political structure, and invent new ways to deal with these in its own way, and so extend the journey of electoral reform from one century to the next.